

OpenDoors®

POLICY BRIEF



Myanmar

Intensifying Persecution and Systematic Discrimination against Christians

Myanmar is in the middle of a protracted civil war, as the ruling military junta faces widespread resistance from pro-democracy forces and ethnic armed groups. The conflict has driven widespread destruction, displacement, and human rights violations. Religious minorities in particular are facing a serious crisis due to increasing conflict and systematic repression. The Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, has played a dominant role in the country's political life and continues to conduct

military operations affecting ethnic and religious minorities.¹ Despite commitments to ceasefires, it has persisted in bombing schools and places of worship.²

Under Article 34 of Myanmar's 2008 Constitution, the right to religious freedom is guaranteed but limited by provisions making it "subject to public order, morality, or health," allowing significant scope for state-imposed restrictions.³ In August 2015, the government enacted the Race and Religion Protection Laws,⁴ including the

¹ religionunplugged.com/news/2023/7/3/tatmadaw-targets-religious-and-ethnic-communities-in-myanmar-yet-again

² fortifyrights.org/mya-inv-2025-05-02/?utm

³ state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/burma

⁴ This is a series of 4 laws addressing interfaith marriage, religious conversion, population control, and polygamy and are alleged to discriminate against women and non-Buddhists.

Religious Conversion Law (Law No. 48/2015). Section 3 of the Religious Conversion Law requires individuals seeking to change their religion to obtain approval from a “registration board” by disclosing personal details, including their current and intended faith and reasons for converting. Under Section 5, applicants must also undergo questioning to determine whether they “truly believe” in the new faith, creating onerous administrative hurdles to religious conversion.⁵ The law further imposes penalties of up to two years’ imprisonment or fines for “insulting or misusing” religion.⁶

Although Myanmar has no official state religion, Article 361 of the 2008 Constitution gives Buddhism a “special position” as the faith of the majority.⁷ Extreme Buddhist nationalist movements, inciteful speech, and violence have fostered an environment of hostility towards Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities, leaving them increasingly vulnerable.⁸ Senior positions in the military and civil service are almost exclusively held by Buddhists, and applications for these roles continue to require candidates to declare their religion.⁹

Escalating conflict and civilian impact

Since the February 2021 coup in which the Tatmadaw seized power from the country’s democratically elected ruling party, the National League for Democracy, insecurity in Myanmar’s ethnic minority regions has worsened sharply, with Christian-majority areas such as Chin, Kachin, Karen, and parts of Shan States among the worst affected. The Tatmadaw, under the military junta and its State Administration Council, deliberately targeted these areas, destroying places of worship and homes, killing civilians, and causing mass forced displacement.¹⁰ In Kachin State, military airstrikes and ground attacks have destroyed villages, churches, and vital infrastructure, forcing thousands to flee into neighboring India as local resistance groups struggle to defend their communities.¹¹ In Karen State, repeated military airstrikes have destroyed homes, schools and public buildings, displacing thousands and caused deep fear and instability.¹² Likewise, in Shan and Chin States, military operations have left villages burned to the



Persecuted and displaced believers in the war zone. Since fighting took place in their areas, they were forced to flee and hide in rock caves to protect themselves from aerial bombings.

ground and civilians exposed to ongoing violence and insecurity.¹³ Across these regions, prolonged fighting and scorched-earth tactics, including indiscriminate airstrikes, mass village burnings, and civilian infrastructure destruction, have destroyed civilian life, forcing large numbers of people to flee and creating a severe humanitarian crisis.¹⁴

Historic tensions in these states, rooted in struggles for political autonomy and ethnic rights, have worsened due to the government’s failure to uphold agreements and its militarization of minority regions.¹⁵ While Buddhist sites have also been damaged during military operations, Christian communities have experienced a disproportionate impact. The repeated targeted attacks reflect a pattern of violence where ethnic identity and faith overlap.¹⁶

Humanitarian emergency amid forced displacement

Widespread displacement across Myanmar’s conflict-affected regions has created one of the country’s worst humanitarian crises in decades. Military offensives and village-burning campaigns have forced entire communities to flee, leaving families in overcrowded camps or hiding in forests and across borders. Women and children, who make up the majority of those displaced, are the most impacted. They face acute risks, including food insecurity, limited access to and

⁵ [icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Myanmar-Freedom-of-religion-brief-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2019-ENG.pdf](https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Myanmar-Freedom-of-religion-brief-Advocacy-Analysis-brief-2019-ENG.pdf)

⁶ natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/r/natlex/fe/details?p3_isn=112532

⁷ 2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/441219-BURMA-2022-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf

⁸ crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar

⁹ 2021-2025.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/441219-BURMA-2022-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf

¹⁰ blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2024/06/24/the-coup-detat-in-myanmar-and-collective-punishment-of-minorities

¹¹ xcept-research.org/publication/myanmars-northern-borderlands-the-humanitarian-aid-crisis-in-northern-kachin-state-outcomes-from-a-rapid-survey-in-november-2024

¹² theguardian.com/global-development/2024/feb/07/myanmar-military-airstrike-karenni-state-school-daw-si-ei-village

¹³ blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2024/06/24/the-coup-detat-in-myanmar-and-collective-punishment-of-minorities

¹⁴ globalr2p.org/countries/myanmar-burma

¹⁵ crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/june-trends-and-july-alerts-2025#myanmar

¹⁶ apnews.com/article/myanmar-churches-airstrikes-human-rights-chin-state-ddd8e076d127c7e78f668ef589d3950d

poor-quality healthcare, and widespread gender-based violence.¹⁷ Reports document instances of sexual violence, including rape, perpetrated by armed forces against displaced women, particularly from ethnic minorities such as the Kachin, Karen, and Rohingya, during village raids and in military detention facilities.¹⁸ The military has carried out airstrikes and bombed IDP camps, killing and injuring many civilians, including women and children.¹⁹ Military roadblocks have restricted access to humanitarian aid and maternal health services in IDP camps. With clinics destroyed, ambulances seized, and medical personnel detained, pregnant women and children remain highly vulnerable to preventable diseases and maternal mortality.²⁰

Restrictions on places of worship

In Myanmar, churches encounter major obstacles to construction and registration because of restrictive laws and complex bureaucracy. Religious organizations must formally register with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and secure government approval for land use before building or repairing places of worship. This requires navigating lengthy and complex administrative procedures, involving multiple layers

of bureaucracy and approvals from local authorities, municipal committees, the Department of Religious Affairs, and state or regional governments.²¹ In practice, approvals to build or register churches are frequently delayed or denied and, as a result, many Christian communities now hold services in private houses, rented offices, or shops to avoid legal complications.²²

Na Ta La Schools and forced conversion

The Border Areas National Races Youth Development Training Schools, commonly known as Na Ta La schools, are run by Myanmar's Ministry of Border Affairs and were established to provide education to children from impoverished ethnic minority, non-Buddhist communities.²³ Reports indicate that most children attending these schools are Christians from ethnic minority groups in Chin and Kachin States. They are prohibited from practicing their faith and are required to participate in Buddhist rituals, including daily worship, head shaving, and wearing monk robes.²⁴ There are also accounts of forced conversion and other human rights violations at these schools. In addition, the threat of military conscription has reportedly been used to pressure young people to convert to Buddhism.²⁵



Pastor Vung (name changed) prays over his unfinished church building – halted by the authorities in Myanmar.

¹⁷ unocha.org/myanmar

¹⁸ ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/women/sr/cfis/new-frontier/subm-sr-violence-against-cso-94-hr-myanmar.pdf. Also see: womenpeacesecurity.org/resource/statement-uncs-crsv-open-debate-naw

¹⁹ thediplomat.com/2023/10/myanmar-junta-accused-of-bombing-kachin-state-idp-camp

²⁰ archpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13690-023-01204-1

²¹ Human Rights and Access to Places of Worship in Myanmar, International Commission of Jurists, January 2021, pp. 21.

²² "Myanmar: Country Dossier", World Watch Research, January 2024, pp. 52. Available at google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKewiUh_oPM0-SPAxUtQUEAHTTOAWUQFnoECBcQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.opendoors.org%2Fpersecution%2Freports%2FMyanmar-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2024.pdf&usq=AOvVaw3TkQdGNIDJoCJYXgsDwDTk&opi=89978449

²³ bnionline.net/en/kachin-news-group/item/4541-non-buddhist-students-must-accept-buddhism-in-na-ta-la-school-in-putao.html

²⁴ csw.org.uk/2012/09/10/press/1427/article.htm

²⁵ burmacampaign.org.uk/images/uploads/Threats_to_Our_Existence.pdf

Recommendations:

To stop the continuous and severe violations of fundamental rights of citizens of Myanmar, Open Doors makes the following recommendations:

1 To address the intensifying conflict and its severe impact on civilians:

- The Government of Myanmar should immediately halt targeted attacks on civilian infrastructure, including places of worship such as churches and Buddhist temples, schools, and homes, in ethnic and religious minority regions, and ensure the protection of civilians in line with international humanitarian law;
- The International Community should impose targeted sanctions on military leaders and entities responsible for directing attacks on civilians. Simultaneously, it should support international efforts to investigate and hold accountable those responsible for such actions, including through UN and other international mechanisms;
- The International Community should impose a comprehensive arms embargo on Myanmar to prevent further indiscriminate violence against civilians and limit the military's capacity for human rights violations;
- ASEAN countries should collectively leverage its diplomatic influence to urge Myanmar's military leadership to end widespread violence against civilians and engage in an inclusive political dialogue as a pathway to restoring peace and stability in the region.

2 To ensure humanitarian access and protection for those forcibly displaced:

- The Government of Myanmar should urgently lift restrictions on humanitarian access, particularly to internally displaced persons

(IDPs) in conflict-affected areas. Priority should be given to targeted aid programs for women and children, in both formal and informal camps, with a focus on preventing gender-based violence and ensuring access to food and healthcare services;

- The International Community should expand and strengthen humanitarian assistance by partnering with local community leaders and civil society organizations to ensure aid reaches displaced populations in hard-to-access areas, particularly in Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Shan States.

3 To ensure respect for Freedom of Religion or Belief and the ability to practice it freely, both individually and in community with others, the Government of Myanmar should remove discriminatory barriers to building and registering places of worship by streamlining approval processes and revising laws to guarantee equal treatment of all religious communities.

4 To stop the forced conversion of students in Na Ta La schools, the Government of Myanmar should reform these schools to ensure that religious instruction and rituals are voluntary, with safeguards to prevent coercion or discrimination against non-Buddhist students. Independent oversight should be established to monitor practices and investigate allegations of forced conversion and other human rights violations.